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## Augustine on Heart and Life

### Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

Edited by John J. O’Keefe and Michael Cameron

## 6. Evil and the God of Augustine

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### Abstract

In the introduction to the book he was writing at the time of his death, Bill Harmless spoke of Augustine’s meditations on evil and its origins in the self-made darkness of the human heart. This paper reflects on this Augustinian understanding of the foundations of evil. The initial section considers the modern project of theodicy in reference to Augustine, with a focus on John Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* and its critics. The second section explores several themes in Augustine’s treatment of evil in context, concentrating on *Confessions* and some earlier texts. The basis of Augustine’s approach to evil is discussed with reference to his account of the soul’s immediate contemplation of God. In that deepest association with God, Augustine finds the root of evil disclosed in the darkness of the soul that resists sustained union with God.

Keywords: God, evil, theodicy, contemplation, John Hick

## Introduction

In *Confessions*, Book 4, the loss of a friend catalyzed for Augustine disquietude in the face of death, leaving him questioning the meaning of his grief and opening to him the larger question of the nature of evil (*Conf.* 4.4.9). So too have I found myself pondering these issues anew with the loss of our friend Bill Harmless. And so, I propose to reflect on Augustine's understanding of evil and to sort out some conflicting approaches found in modern scholarship. As it happens, this is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the most influential book in Anglo-American philosophical theology on evil and Augustine: John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*. I would like, then, to begin with Hick's analysis, as well as some criticisms of it – both specific and fundamental. Then I will explore several themes in Augustine's treatment of evil directly and in context. I will be concentrating on *Confessions* and a few earlier texts, revisiting material that I discussed with Bill when I was working on earlier projects. In the introduction to the book that he was writing at the time of his death, Bill spoke of Augustine's meditations on evil and its origins in the darkness of the human heart. He said: "Augustine would insist that ours is a self-made darkness, that the heart's darkness is our own doing . . . [and] that darkness came to occupy and unmake the very core of our being" (5). It is that recognition that I wish to explore in this paper. In doing so, I will not be discussing the entirety of Augustine's thinking on evil, but only this dispositive insight.

## Augustinian theodicy

Theodicy, whose lineage goes back to Leibniz, is defined by Hick as "the defense of the justice and righteousness of God in the face of the fact of evil" (6). As thus represented, theodicy is a product of the Enlightenment and centers on the claim that the reality of evil might lead to the denial of the existence of God. On moral grounds the existence of evil might be seen as compelling counter-evidence to the existence of God. As such, the debate over theodicy is a rational dispute about God, distinct in conceptual character from any subjective appropriation of the idea of God. Theodicy is, therefore, the exercise of critical theory. Hick is keen to establish that wall of separation, and indeed this is true of theodicists in general. I will return to this important move later on.

Hick regards Augustine not only as a theodicist, but also as the fountainhead of Western Christian theodicy. As such he assimilates Augustine to the modern project of theodicy and in particular to its assumed context of theoretical debate about divine existence. He does so by reconstructing Augustine's thought, drawing together themes from different works into a larger theoretical construct. The chief components of his recovered model of Augustinian theodicy are worth recalling. They include:

- the free-will defense: that evil is a product of the free choice of creatures;
- evil as *privatio boni*: that evil is the lack of goodness or being;
- the principle of plenitude: that no possibility of divine production can remain unactualized;
- the aesthetic theme: that evil contributes to the perfection of the universe when seen as a whole.

Hick considers these elements as theoretical assertions by Augustine intended to mitigate claims that the existence of God is undermined by the existence of evil. But once reconstructed in this fashion, Hick goes on to insist that Augustine's theodicy is unsatisfactory. He maintains that the free-will defense fails because Augustine has no way to explain rationally the initial choice of evil. Moreover, Hick regards the other three pillars of Augustinian theodicy – the non-being of evil, the principle of plenitude, and the aesthetic theme – as relics of pagan Neoplatonism. Augustinian theodicy is, therefore, both incoherent and inconsistent with Christian theism.

Hick's representation of Augustinian theodicy bears repeating today both because of its influence in framing subsequent readings of Augustine and because it is emblematic of the problems associated with the project of theodicy itself. An initial difficulty is rooted in the nature of Hick's reading of Augustine. In order for Augustine to be plausibly treated as the fountainhead of Western Christian theodicy, Hick had to assemble themes in his thought into an apparently coherent theoretic construct, an "amalgamated theodicy" – to use Terrence Tilley's phrase (131-32). Its elements were extracted from different works written to differing purposes from different stages in Augustine's development. Hick homogenizes early works like the anti-Manichaean *On the Nature of the Good* side by side with middle period works like *Confessions* and late works like *City of God*. Moreover, ideas in Augustine that are at best secondary – like the principle of plenitude or the aesthetic theme – become major theoretical planks in Hick's reconstruction. Yet reading Augustine in this fashion rests on the tacit assumption that his goal was to hammer together a systematic theology. But, on the contrary, *Reconsiderations*, his great literary retrospective, makes amply clear that he worked on various issues and controversies over his long career, often shifting and adjusting his views. In a sense, Hick became Augustine's theological editor, revising, collecting, and accentuating ideas from different contexts in order to derive a theoretical solution to the problem of evil, a theodicy in the modern sense.

That assumption is crucial to the interpretive trajectory initiated by Hick: the supposition that Augustine was doing theodicy in a fashion that can be straightforwardly assimilated to modern debates in that field. Here the pushback by contemporary anti-theodacists comes to the fore. I have in mind most prominently Kenneth Surin and Terrence Tilley, among others, who are opposed to theodicy. The lengthy dispute between these two camps is not my concern. But this critique of modern theodicy is helpful in throwing Augustine's thinking into relief. More is involved than just a historicizing plea for context. The deeper problem is commensurability itself. For the very project of theodicy is saturated with assumptions that Augustine did not share. We need to reflect on two of the most salient of these assumptions in the interest of moving beyond them.

- A. Theodicy rests on the fundamental assumption that theoretical answers to the existence of evil are determined by a rational observer who seeks a coherent account of the divine purpose. Theodicy thus relies on discursive knowledge of the divine nature, such that the justice of God can be lucidly understood in the face of evil. So, some degree of cognitive surety about divine causality and

its purpose is necessary to warrant the claims of the theodist. At its core, theodicy seeks a rational, objective, theoretical account of God.

- B. It follows that theodicy is conducted by a disinterested philosopher, engaged in problem-solving. Hick is especially keen to press this point: that theodicy must be sharply separated from actually dealing with evil or from the emotions attendant upon that struggle. Indeed, it might be said that theodicy is a solitary, armchair discipline, conducted by the atomized self. As Surin puts it, theodicy rests on a sort of “cognitive individualism” (20). It is the individual judgment of the theodist that determines, for example, whether a version of the free-will defense seems intuitively plausible or not.

Neither of these clusters of embedded assumptions is commensurable with the thought of Augustine. With respect to the theoretical character of theodicy, Augustine is not primarily interested in distanced knowledge of God. That is because he has only limited confidence in the powers of the discursive intellect, whose products are at best flawed and provisional. Cognitive judgment is an act that involves the will, in particular the dispositions of the knowing subject. And, for Augustine, these dispositions are conditioned by the moral character of the self. As a result, the apparently disinterested judgments of the rational philosopher are revealed as covert acts of self-expression. Augustine regards those judgments as the products of human cognitive incapacitation that is rooted in moral flaws of our own making. Thus, theodicy is subtly infected with aspects of the very evil it purports to explain. Moreover, the project of disinterested reflection is itself a conceit grounded in cognitive pride, in the sinister self-nescience that Augustine sometimes associated with pagan philosophy. Without conversion of the soul, without the illumination of grace, theodicy is fatally flawed. And even with grace, the project of theoretical appraisal of God is limited, because true knowledge of God for Augustine involves transforming the soul so that it might move beyond observation into communion. I will return to this matter in subsequent sections of this paper.

It might be said, then, that if this line of criticism is correct, Augustine did not espouse a free will defense in the face of evil or propose any theodicy at all. The modern search for an Augustinian theodicy, it may be further said, is a dead end. I think that statement is true as far it goes: the modern project of theodicy was never Augustine's. And yet, having said all this, I want to underscore that I am not making common cause with the contemporary anti-theodists, but only borrowing aspects of their critique of Augustine as a theodist. For anti-theodists usually go on to supply alternatives to theodicy, often theological in character, that claim to address evil directly. These appeals to *praxis* suggest that pragmatic social action must supersede abstract theory. Indeed, it has been claimed that theodicy is not only misguided, but is itself evil, contributing to an anesthetized consciousness and promoting distanced inaction in the face of evil (Tilley). But this larger anti-theodist assertion is itself based on a suspiciously sharp distinction between theory and practice, one that promotes withdrawal from a deeply held human effort to frame the human experience in rational terms. Indeed, the search for meaning in the face of evil seems to be ineluctably human. So like the practice of theodicy that they reject, anti-theodists rely upon many of the same modern modes of thought (Mathewes: 36-43). For my purposes in this paper, it is important to insist that, while the modern notion of theodicy fails to capture Augustine's thinking on the problem of evil, he did indeed see evil as an affront to moral rationality, something that required intellectual

framing. So while theodicy may be an inadequate description of Augustine's efforts to address evil, it points towards the need for a more capacious understanding of Augustine's thinking on the matter. To its recovery we now turn.

### Contemplation and Evil<sup>1</sup>

Augustine's theology of evil centers on two fundamental insights: the non-being of evil and the irrationality of evil. Both are part of a larger metaphysical account of reality into which the existence of evil is set. Any serious effort to understand Augustine must begin here. In this section, I propose to reconsider both of these much-misunderstood ideas by tracing their foundations in Augustine. Rather than a theoretical holdover from pagan Platonism, as Hick would have it, this understanding of evil is, in fact, one of the most passionately described features of Augustine's conversion narrative. And this is so because, as Augustine claims repeatedly, he came to discern the ontological status of evil in the same instance of transformative insight in which the nature of God was disclosed to him. Such a claim, of course, issues a challenge to a host of modern conventions and so invites our scrutiny.

We have come in recent years to recognize, due to the work of Pierre Hadot (1995), that philosophy in antiquity was often understood to be a way of life. To grasp the thought of Augustine we need to draw out the larger significance of Hadot's point. Augustine, like his Platonist sources, was accustomed to regard metaphysics or theology not as theory about the divine but, to a considerable extent, as a map sketching the soul's spiritual path. The goal was not theoretical appraisal but spiritual association. Plotinus, for example, makes this point repeatedly in *Ennead* VI.9. So too does Augustine, who insists that his life was changed by seeking for transcendence and then coming to discover powerfully, directly, and experientially its reality in God. Out of that insight tumbled a new way to understand evil. That was not a theory, but an experience so deeply known within the innermost recesses of the soul that it went beyond the categories of everyday experience or thought. That is where Augustine's grasp of the non-being of evil is to be found.

Before turning to this subject, I want to make one additional preliminary comment, one that relates to a practice that leads to confusion in many readings of Augustine. Augustine's thinking, for all its apparent complexity, is both deceptively economical as well as provisional. He has some key insights that form the core of his thought, and he returns to them again and again, often shifting his vantage point or terminology or context. But the main lines of his thinking are usually evident, if not always entirely homogeneous. He walks back around earlier formulations over and over again. This is, I think, attributable in part to the mixed constitution of his writing, its sometimes occasional origins, its sometimes controversialist character, its conjunction of reflection with descriptions of practice. His works share these characteristics with those of many ancient philosophers (Hadot 2009: 61-74). To miss this is to risk misreading him.

Augustine states in his early writings and in *Confessions* that he had several experiences of divine transcendence, both before and after his conversion. He is quite insistent about this.

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<sup>1</sup> Latin texts from the *Confessions* are taken from O'Donnell's edition; all other Latin texts by Augustine are taken from the on-line edition of Migne's *Patrologia Latina*. All translations of these Augustinian texts are the author's.

We see this in *De animae quantitate*, written in Rome around 387/8 CE just after the events of his conversion, thus making it his earliest treatment of the subject. There he iterates an account of the soul's seven-stage interior path to transcendence that is at once a prescriptive template and an early record of ascension. We learn the impact on Augustine of the conversionary insight of God's transcendence, of a God who created the soul and who therefore remains its "dwelling place and home" (*An. quant.* 1.2). Most importantly he emphasizes that the soul, even at the penultimate stage of interior ascension when it has begun to achieve an inner grasp of truth, is nonetheless prone to recidivism. This failure at transcendence is vividly attributed to the moral opacity of the fallen soul:

Those who wish to do so before they are washed and healed are so repelled by the light of truth that they think there is in it not only nothing good but even much evil. And so they preclude from it the name of truth, and with some measure of desire and miserable pleasure they flee into their own dark recesses, which they can endure because of their sickness while cursing their cure (*An. quant.* 33.75).<sup>2</sup>

But those souls who persevere arrive "at the vision and contemplation of truth," a dwelling place (*mansio*) for the enjoyment of the perfect, true and eternal good. This, we are told, is what great souls saw and see (*vidisse ac videre*). Notice that this account of interior ascension bears the character I mentioned above. It is not theoretical, but an attestation of practice.

The larger implications of this graded ascension into higher levels of reality are surveyed in another early work, *De vera religione*, written in Thagaste around 389/90. There Augustine begins by praising Platonism for its commitment to an ultimate, transcendent God who is superior to our minds. From it he tells us that he has come to realize fully that transcendent truth can be sought only with the mind, and not with the senses, but only if the mind has been cured (*Vera rel.* 3.3). Then the enjoyment of eternal contemplation is given to the rational soul and through it comes eternal life. Here Augustine begins to work out the implications of this transcendentalism for the understanding of evil. He concentrates on the opacity of the soul that frustrated the soul's ascension initially in the account we just considered in *De animae quantitate*. That failure lay in the soul's perplexing inner choice to fall away from God even as it came into the divine presence. In *De vera religione* he comes to recognize that the core of evil lies in the soul's own movement away from God, a choice rooted in a misplaced sense of the self. And that misdirects the soul away from reality itself towards what is less real. The choice of that vector constitutes evil (*Vera rel.* 11.22). Augustine is now clear that the recognition of God's transcendent goodness has disclosed the reality of the soul's choice to separate itself from God. He summarizes the movement of the soul away from its source and then back to it again as follows:

one God from whom we exist, through whom we exist, in whom we exist;  
from whom we withdrew, to whom we have been made dissimilar, by whom  
we have not been allowed to perish; the principle to whom we are returning,

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<sup>2</sup> *Quod qui prius volunt facere quam mundati et sanati fuerint, ita illa luce reverberantur veritatis, ut non solum nihil boni, sed etiam mali plurimum in ea putent esse, atque ab ea nomen veritatis abiudicent, et cum quadam libidine et voluptate miserabili in suas tenebras, quas eorum morbus pati potest, medicinae maledicentes refugiant.*

the beauty which we seek, and the grace by which we are reconciled (*Vera rel.* 55.113).<sup>3</sup>

The initial choice to withdraw away from God is the primordial source of evil and the disfigurement of the image of God within us. This can only be reversed by divine grace. Thus to come to know God is to come to know the enormity of the soul's self-destructive loss.

These early texts are tautly written, with theory, contemplative method, and personal attestation interwoven. *Confessions* is the ultimate expression of these same elements. As in the early works just mentioned, *Confessions* embeds theory in a narrative that exhibits the nature and effects of evil. Here we find the root of evil sharply exposed by the soul's exercise of contemplation. The account of evil in Book VII is perhaps Augustine's definitive one, so it merits close scrutiny. But one central point needs to be made at the outset. Augustine's recognition of evil as the privation of the Good is not articulated simply as a philosophical theory, as theodiscists would have it. It is, instead, a recognition that falls out from Augustine's interior experience of transcendence. It is the cognitive fruit of contemplation.

Augustine's arresting, privative notion of evil is framed by the ascension narrative at *Confessions* 7.10.16. Here we again find the immediate knowledge of transcendent Wisdom joined to the painful recognition of the soul's fallen condition. The narrative begins with the soul turning to its inner depths through divine assistance and discovering a higher level of reality:

Thus admonished to return to myself, I entered into my innermost depths with you as my guide, and I was able to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, saw above that eye of the soul an immutable light higher than my mind – not the everyday light visible to all bodies, nor a greater light of the same type that might shine more clearly and fill everything with its magnitude. It was not that light but another, entirely different from all others. Nor was it above my mind in the way that oil is on top of water or the sky is above the earth. Rather it was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it (*Conf.* 7.10.16).<sup>4</sup>

The first move is the interior turn, away from materiality, so that eye of the soul can discern the light of reason. That light is discovered to be the soul's eternal and transcendent source. That initial recognition is then expanded into a fuller understanding of the God revealed through interior contemplation:

Whoever knows the truth knows it, and whoever knows it knows eternity.  
Love knows it. O eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity, you are my

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<sup>3</sup> *unum Deum a quo sumus, per quem sumus, in quo sumus: a quo discessimus, cui dissimiles facti sumus, a quo perire non permissi sumus: principium ad quod recurrimus, et formam quam sequimur, et gratiam qua reconciliamur.*

<sup>4</sup> *Et inde admonitus redire ad memet ipsum, intravi in intima mea, duce te, et potui, quoniam factus es adiutor meus. intravi et vidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam, lucem incommutabilem: non hanc vulgarem et conspicuam omni carni, nec quasi ex eodem genere grandior erat, tamquam si ista multo multoque clarius claresceret totumque occuparet magnitudine. non hoc illa erat, sed aliud, aliud valde ab istis omnibus. nec ita erat supra mentem meam, sicut oleum super aquam, nec sicut caelum super terram; sed superior, quia ipsa fecit me, et ego inferior, quia factus ab ea.*

God. To you I sigh day and night. When I first knew you, you raised me up so that I might see that what I saw was being, and that I who saw it was not yet being. And you repelled the weakness of my gaze by shining ardently upon me and I shuddered with love and awe. And I discovered myself far from you in a region of dissimilarity and heard, as it were, a voice from on high: "I am the bread of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into yourself, as with food for your body, but you will be changed into me" (*Conf.* 7.10.16).<sup>5</sup>

The soul has achieved unmediated recognition of God as true love, eternal truth, and beloved eternity. But it also has immediate recognition of its own shortcomings. While God is perfect being, the soul is not. It is not capable of sustaining the unmediated association with God that had been granted to it. The perfect being of God overwhelms the fallen soul, so that it finds itself again in a state of separation from God. Thus, to know God is to know the self as culpably fallen. Those two searing truths are inescapably conjoined. The passage concludes by underscoring the certainty of the disclosure of God's transcendence:

And I said: But truth can't just be nothing even if it is not diffused through finite or infinite space? And you cried from far off: "Truly, I am who am." And I heard as one hears in the heart, and from that moment there was no longer any doubt. It would have been easier to doubt that I was alive than that there is no truth perceived by the intellect through the things that are made (*Conf.* 7.10.16).<sup>6</sup>

In this ascension the soul is given the inner power to discern God as eternal truth, true love, and beloved eternity. What it encounters there beyond its own interior depths is another level of reality, where truth itself exists eternally despite existing beyond the earthly level of space-time. Augustine uses the language of scriptural audition to underscore this. He hears in his heart the words of Exodus 3:14. "I am who I am." From this moment of transcendence several further insights then emerge at *Confessions* 7.11.17. First, the things that are below God have only relative existence. They neither absolutely exist, as God does, nor do they entirely lack being. They exist because they come from God, but they are not wholly real, since they are not God. That assertion then opens up a new grasp of evil. He says at 7.12.18 that since whatever things exist are good, the evil into whose origins he had been inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good. And so evil has no being; that is, it is not a fixed substance. It is, instead, an epiphenomenon of divine creation characterized by the lack of absolute being that attends all finite things. Evil is the vector away from God so that

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<sup>5</sup> *qui novit veritatem, novit eam, et qui novit eam, novit aeternitatem. caritas novit eam. o aeterna veritas et vera caritas et cara aeternitas! tu es deus meus, tibi suspiro die ac nocte. et cum te primum cognovi, tu assumisti me, ut viderem esse, quod viderem, et nondum me esse, qui viderem. et reverberasti infirmitatem aspectus mei, radians in me vehementer, et contremui amore et horrore: et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis, tamquam audirem vocem tuam de excelso: cibus sum grandium: cresce et manducabis me. nec tu me in te mutabis sicut cibum carnis tuae, sed tu mutaberis in me.*

<sup>6</sup> *et cognovi, quoniam pro iniquitate erudisti hominem, et tabescere fecisti sicut araneam animam meam, et dixi: numquid nihil est veritas, quoniam neque per finita neque per infinita locorum spatia diffusa est? et clamasti de longinquo: immo vero ego sum qui sum. et audivi, sicut auditur in corde, et non erat prorsus unde dubitarem, faciliusque dubitarem vivere me, quam non esse veritatem, quae per ea, quae facta sunt, intellecta conspicitur.*

for God, evil has no being at all. Notice here that Augustine insists that these insights emerged from contemplation. He saw these truths intellectually and they were made clear to him immediately. He does not infer them from the experience; neither does he interpret the characteristics of the experience to determine them. Moreover, he insists that he discerned these things clearly and indubitably. So, I think it is fair to say that Augustine's account of the non-being of evil is not just a piece of metaphysical theory, but something that he regards as ineluctably disclosed in a moment of interior contemplation.

With this representation of evil as the privation of goodness and being comes the recognition of its irrational origins in the will. That understanding too is knit into his contemplative recognition of levels of reality. At *Confessions* 7.16.22, Augustine says once again that his inquiry into the nature of iniquity led him not to a substance but to the perversity of the will. That will twist the soul away from the highest reality. In so doing, it abandoned its innermost self and swelled with what is external to it. Note that this is an act of perverse self-abandonment for Augustine, a loss of the intimate for the external. By fleeing from the highest being of God, the soul slips away from its own highest reality as well, preferring instead what is inferior to itself. It seeks a false individuation, a diminished existence fraught with contingency. Thus, we see stitched together here the two main themes of Augustine's account of evil, non-being and irrationality, both direct insights from contemplation.

The initial account of contemplation that Augustine gives helps us, therefore, to understand the character of his claims about evil. To clarify this further, I want to summarize briefly the descriptions of interior ascension in *Confessions* 7.17.23 and 9.10.23-25. Augustine charts in these iterations levels of reality, value, knowledge, and the soul, all together. To move more deeply into the interior of the soul is to move into a higher mode of knowing. And that takes the soul into a more perfect level of existence, to the true and complete reality of God. To do so is to leave behind what is less real and more evil. In 7.17.23, the ascent narrative begins by describing the limitations of contemplation for the fallen soul, much like what we saw in *De animae quantitate*. As the contemplative soul goes deeper into itself, it moves beyond the power of discursive reasoning into an unmediated intellectual perception of that which is real and unchanging. And then its moral status brings it crashing back to the surface of temporal consciousness:

And I marveled that at last I loved you, not a phantom in place of you. Yet I was not stable enough to enjoy my God but was swept up to you by your beauty and then torn away from you by my weight. I collapsed with a groan into inferior things. That weight was my sexual habit. Yet the memory of you remained with me and I had no sort of doubt to whom I should cling, though I was not yet able to do that (*Conf.* 7.17.23).<sup>7</sup>

Because of his impoverished moral state, Augustine's soul is unable to participate in the transcendent God. He cannot escape the material level on which his soul was morally centered. But he also describes how his soul passed through five interior levels through divine grace,

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<sup>7</sup> *Et mirabar, quod iam te amabam, non pro te phantasma: et non stabam frui deo meo, sed rapiebar ad te decore tuo, moxque diripiebar abs te pondere meo, et ruebam in ista cum gemitu; et pondus hoc consuetudo carnalis. sed mecum erat memoria tui, neque ullo modo dubitabam esse, cui cobaerere, sed nondum me esse, qui cobaerere.*

coming to immaterial being before falling back again to his customary material condition. Those levels include the body, the soul that perceives the body, the inward force of the soul itself, the power of discursive reasoning, and lastly, intellect itself:

Then I was inquiring why I approved the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and on what basis I made unqualified judgments about mutable things, saying: this ought to be thus and that ought not to be thus. While asking on what basis I made the judgments I was making, I discovered the unchanging and actual eternity of truth above my changeable mind. And so by stages I went from bodies to the soul which senses through the body, and from there to its inner force, to which bodily senses report external things; that is as far as beasts can go. And from there I went on to the power of reasoning to which is referred for judgment that which arises from the bodily senses. This power itself, ascertaining within me its mutability, raised itself up to its own understanding. It led its thinking away from that which is habitual, withdrawing itself from contradictory swarms of fantasies so that it might discover the light strewn upon it, and then, without any doubt, it could declare that the immutable is preferable to the mutable. On this basis it could know the immutable, for unless it could know the immutable in this way, there would be no way to prefer the immutable to the mutable with certainty. And so in the flash of a trembling glance it reached that which is. Then I clearly saw your invisible things understood through the things that are made. But I did not have the strength to keep my gaze fixed. My weakness rebounded and I returned to my customary state. I bore with me only a cherished memory and a desire, as it were, for something I had smelled but could not yet eat (*Conf.* 7.17.23).<sup>8</sup>

It is, therefore, what the soul has itself chosen that defines its level of reality. The soul is restricted in its ability to associate with God because of its own self-constructed moral identity. Here Augustine's invention of spiritual autobiography comes to the fore, because the reader is well prepared for this claim of moral vagrancy, which was comprised of both his personal focus on worldly success and prestige in general and his sexual compulsions in particular.<sup>9</sup> The latter had been particularly accentuated at the end of *Confessions*, Book 6, where Augustine emphasizes the problem of his sexual habits, thus framing the account of this impediment to

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<sup>8</sup> *quaerens enim, unde approbarem pulchritudinem corporum sive caelestium sive terrestrium, et quid mihi praesto esset integre de mutabilibus, iudicanti et dicenti, hoc ita esse debet, illud non ita: hoc ergo quaerens, unde iudicarem, cum ita iudicarem, inveneram incommutabilem et veram veritatis aeternitatem supra mentem meam commutabilem. atque ita gradatim a corporibus ad sentientem per corpus animam, atque inde ad eius interiorum vim, cui sensus corporis exteriora nuntiaret, et quousque possunt bestiae, atque inde rursus ad ratiocinantem potentiam, ad quam refertur iudicandum, quod sumitur a sensibus corporis. quae se quoque in me comperiens mutabilem, erexit se ad intelligentiam suam, et abduxit cogitationem a consuetudine, subtrahens se contradicentibus turbis phantasmatum, ut inveniret, quo lumine aspergeretur; cum sine ulla dubitatione clamaret incommutabile praefendum esse mutabili, unde nosset ipsum incommutabile – quod nisi aliquo modo nosset, nullo modo illud mutabili certa praeponebat – et pervenit ad id, quod est, in ictu trepidantis aspectus. tunc vero invisibilia tua per ea quae facta sunt intellecta conspexi, sed aciem figere non valui, et repercussa infirmitate redditus solitis, non mecum ferebam nisi amantem memoriam et quasi olefacta desiderantem, quae comedere nondum possem.*

<sup>9</sup> We hear about his specifically sexual habits throughout the early books: *Conf.* 2.2.2-3; 2.3.6-8; 3.1.1; 3.3.5; 4.2.2.

sustained contemplation. At 6.12.21-23 he relates that his habit of satisfying with intensity his insatiable sexual desires held him captive and tortured him. At 6.15.25 he is forced to send his long-term mistress away. She vows celibacy, while he, a prisoner of lust, takes a new, temporary mistress. He emphasizes that this active sexual habit left his soul diseased. Thus, the collapse of his soul's ascent to immateriality at 7.17.23 follows from this sustained, antecedent account of his sexual dysfunction. That is the habitual weakness limiting his soul's capacity for contemplation. Hence his need "to follow the example of a woman" and also vow celibacy in Book 8.

It is worth underscoring that these pre-baptismal ascents are not sharply different from the post-baptismal ascension at Ostia described in *Confessions* 12.10.2. All articulate the soul's limited capacity for sustained association with God and its need for grace to cure the weight of its fall. Monica and her son long for that redress of their souls' sinful state, so that the unmediated association with God that they enjoyed might become eternal:

but him whom we love in these things, we would hear without them. It was just so at that moment as we extended ourselves and in sudden meditation touched the eternal Wisdom that remains above all things. If only this could be sustained and other visions of a much lesser sort could be withdrawn, then this could ravish and absorb and envelop in inward joys its beholder. And so too is everlasting life like that moment of understanding after which we sighed. Is this not what is meant by "enter into the joy of your Lord"? And when will that be? When we all rise again, but are not all changed (*Conf.* 9.10.25).<sup>10</sup>

What the Ostian ascension narrative reminds the reader is that even baptized Catholic souls cannot sustain the unmediated presence of eternal Wisdom. Only after death can souls be free of the lesser visions that flood the fallen soul's consciousness. Once again the most sublime absorption of the soul in the joy of the divine presence discloses the human condition defined by the soul's choice of separation from God. In that interior moment, Augustine finds a divine love that can be shared only when Christ raises his soul from the death of evil and sin.

Several essential points for our inquiry emerge from these ascension narratives in the *Confessions*. Contemplation offers a momentary reversal of the fall, restoring a direct association of the soul with its divine source. And in experiencing this, Augustine is also claiming to have experienced a reversal of the vector away from the true being of God that constitutes evil. Through interior contemplation the soul achieves transcendence, not just beyond the diminished reality of space-time, but also beyond the false individuation that it chose when pursuing an existence distanced from God. For this reason, contemplation is eschatological, since it allows the soul to leave behind in wisdom the first fruits of its conversion to higher things. As such, the soul can see where it belongs in wisdom if its struggle against evil eventuates in its return. So, Augustine's account proposes that evil can be overcome not just after death but at least potentially now in life. None of this vaulting into the transcendent

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<sup>10</sup> *sed ipsum, quem in his amamus, ipsum sine his audiamus, sicut nunc extendimus nos et rapida cogitatione attingimus aeternam sapientiam super omnia manentem, si continetur hoc et subtrahantur aliae visiones longe imparis generis, et haec una rapiat et absorbeat et recondat in interiora gaudia spectatorem suum, ut talis sit sempiterna vita, quale fuit hoc momentum intellegentiae, cui suspiravimus, nonne hoc est: Intra in gaudium domini tui? et istud quando? an cum omnes resurgimus, sed non omnes immutabimur?*

depths of divine Wisdom is accomplished by the soul alone, for all these narratives emphasize the role of divine grace in lifting up the soul. But the larger point is that Augustine sees the redress of evil to be certainly revealed to souls to whom this moment of transcendence is granted. That point is an important pushback against modern claims that the Augustinian tradition trades on a vague sense of transcendence, deferred until after death. The overcoming of evil is revealed even now to the soul by the divine Wisdom that accomplished it.

Another key component of Augustine's account of evil emerges from the epistemic character of these accounts of transcendence. As just noted, in contemplation the soul enters a zone of reality that cannot be captured by the discourse of sense perception and the concepts of empirical consciousness. This same pattern is repeated at Ostia, now in a joint ascension with Monica. There the physical universe first is superseded, and then the workings of the mind, so that the souls arrive together at eternal Wisdom, the seat of the archetypes of lower realities. Thus, their souls are said to touch before returning to the sound of their discourse bound by the condition of time. In the reiterative account of *Confessions* 9.10.25, Augustine insists that this was an unmediated intellectual vision of the divine Wisdom. In particular, all forms of language and every sign have fallen away. So too the obscurity of symbolic discourse is no longer involved. In this moment of understanding, in this instant of intellection (*hoc momentum intellegentiae*), the souls enter the presence of Wisdom without mediation. So what Augustine cannot do is capture discursively the reality of transcendent Wisdom. Nor can it be articulated theoretically. Discursive reasoning is superseded in contemplation, but so too is theodicy. For what the soul discovers in contemplation is the false reality that its choice of evil had initiated. That recognition is not the product of a theory, but an insight that obviates the distanced, theoretical claims of theodicy. Moreover, it is now clear why rational theodicy fails to capture the nature of evil. For the soul's choice of declension away from God resists conceptualization precisely because it is an option towards that which lacks conceptual shape. It is the soul's inchoate embrace of a lesser self for which no account can be rendered. To construct an Augustinian theodicy is, therefore, to miss his insights into both the nature of God and evil.

A final note on the inadequacy of theodicy as a reading of Augustine on evil. Earlier I mentioned the cognitive individualism of modern theodicy. For Augustine, this is precisely what the self must shed in contemplation. *Confessions*, Book 12, sets this out with great force in a series of passages that offer a second appraisal of the autobiographical accounts of contemplation. These are presented as dominical auditions in which the soul hears the voice of the Lord spiritually. We learn that there is a "heaven of heaven," the heavenly Jerusalem which contemplates God without mediation, participates in God's eternity, and enjoys the presence of God. It exists, he says, in the transcendent realm of the intellect. Most importantly, it is a city in the heavens above the visible heavens whose citizens are the pure at heart who see God. These holy souls know God in an act of immediacy and simultaneity – not in an enigma, but face to face. It is from this community that begins the movement of the will that initiates evil, and here the choice of attenuated individualism is made. Augustine recounts that he has heard it said in a loud voice that this movement of the will away from God is a diminution of being, a culpable mistake, and a sin. Once again, in contemplation evil is discovered for what it is: an irrational choice of ontological diminution. But it also clear that, therefore, contemplation, when properly understood, is not an individual act. It is by joint

intellection within a community that the soul sees God. Thus, the loss engendered by the soul's descent is a loss of its true identity in an interstitial community in union with God. No theoretical, discursive theodicy can explain the enormity of that irrational act. So, to conclude with Bill Harmless's insight from Augustine: evil is disclosed in the soul's interior contemplation of God to have its origins in the self-made darkness of the human heart.

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